

## A suggestion for the stimulus

Gavin Melmed, JD, MBA, MD

**A**fter directing nearly a trillion dollars towards our ailing banks, insurance companies, and auto industry, the Obama administration has now pushed through a bill to spend just short of a trillion dollars to jump-start the rest of the economy. I am all for this. This recession has been devastating, and the sooner we get Americans back to work the better. But before all this money is allocated, I want to make a plea to our new president to steer some of that money to us—the bicycle commuters.

I am part of a small but growing minority who tempt fate by riding to work. When possible, we try to ride on bike paths or designated bike lanes. But for the most part, we share the road with cars. And they don't like us any more than we like them. At least seven of my fellow riders have died recently in my city, Dallas. Many other local cyclists have been injured by automobiles, including golf commentator David Feherty, who has been hit twice. Here, we have a few token bike paths that crisscross parts of our city, but not much else. There are no designated bike lanes on any of our streets. When I share the road, it is with 4000-pound SUVs, many with their occupants chatting on mobile phones.

It doesn't have to be this way. City planners in some of our more progressive cities have made space for us, with designated bike lanes on streets and miles of bike paths. Portland has gone one step further, creating "bike boxes" at major intersections, where cyclists can stop in front of cars, whose drivers are prohibited from turning right on red. This makes drivers aware of these cyclists and limits the possibility that a right-turning car will run over a cyclist who is going straight.

These measures do more than just protect cyclists. They recognize our right to exist. They send a message that we are part of the transportation community, which in turn causes more people to join our ranks. Here in Dallas, people look at me as

if I'm several fries short of a happy meal when they learn I ride to work. They then inevitably tell me about their best friend's aunt's cousin who got run over recently. I bet bicycle commuters in Portland don't have these conversations. The same people who accuse me of being a lunatic also look at me with a bit of envy, recognizing that by foregoing automobile commuting, I have been able to simultaneously increase my physical fitness and decrease my carbon footprint.

President Obama has emphasized the need for the development of renewable and cleaner forms of energy. And I concur. When they become more practical and affordable, there will be an electric car in my driveway. But what form of energy is cleaner and more renewable than the human body? We need no advanced battery technology. No plug-in stations. Just bike paths and lanes.

Our new president has also emphasized the need to reform our medical system and the need to reduce medical costs. Again, as a physician, I am fully behind him. But a significant portion of our increased expenses comes from the damage we are doing to our own bodies. Currently, more than 31% of Americans are obese. This is up from just 15% in 1976. This has led to high rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and just about any medical problem you can think of. I have lost 20 pounds since I started riding to work. Some of my fellow riders have lost much more. I have no doubt that our form of transport, if more widely adopted, will lead to long-term health benefits for riders and significantly decreased medical costs for our society. This, of course, assumes that we don't regularly get run over. Trauma surgery can be quite pricy these days.

So please, Mr. Obama, when you are allocating a trillion dollars for bridges, roads, tunnels, and all the rest of the things we need, consider putting a sliver—just a sliver—of these funds towards bike paths and lanes. It will be money well spent.

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